DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 385 200 HE 028 466

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TITLE The Influence of John Dewey on Experimental Colleges: The Black Mountain Example.
PUB DATE 22 Apr 95
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, April 18-22, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Presidents; Educational Attitudes; *Educational History; *Educational Innovation; *Educational Philosophy; Experiential Learning; *Experimental Colleges; Higher Education; Holistic Approach; Liberal Arts; Student Centered Curriculum
IDENTIFIERS *Black Mountain College NC; *Dewey (John); Rice (John Andrew)

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the influence of John Dewey and his educational philosophy and methods on the development of experimental liberal arts colleges during the 1930s. It reviews the student-centered, holistic, experiential curriculum advocated by Dewey and others, and the role of John Andrew Rice in founding Black Mountain College near Black Mountain, North Carolina, in 1933. The paper examines Rice's career, the reasons for the founding of Black Mountain College, the educational methods used at the college, and the influence of Dewey on the development of the college. Dewey visited the college three times during the 1930s, having a direct influence on the curriculum and instructional practices. Dewey also had an indirect effect on Rice and the college through the educational debates he participated in and the institutional examples of his philosophy and methods. (Contains 20 references.) (MDM)

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THE INFLUENCE OF JOHN DEWEY ON EXPERIMENTAL COLLEGES: THE BLACK MOUNTAIN EXAMPLE

By Katherine C. Reynolds, University of South Carolina

This paper was prepared for presentation at the 1995 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA, April 22, 1995.

The author wishes to thank Frederick Buchanan, University of Utah, for his advice that a biography of Black Mountain College founder John Andrew Rice would be enriched by an exploration of the ideals and history of "progressive education."

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THE INFLUENCE OF JOHN DEWEY ON EXPERIMENTAL COLLEGES: THE BLACK MOUNTAIN EXAMPLE

By Katherine C. Reynolds, University of South Carolina

> *"Universities, like families and like nations, live only as they are continually reborn, and rebirth means constant new endeavor of thought and action, and these mean an ever renewed process of change."* (John Dewey, address at Founder's Day, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT, May 1, 1939)

When John Dewey chaired the 1931 "Conference on Curriculum for the College of Liberal Arts" at Rollins College, he pleaded ignorance of the thorny issues to be pondered by the gathering of prominent educators from liberal arts colleges. "All my recent years have been given to graduate teaching," he insisted on the opening morning of the four-day meeting. "I have had practically no college teaching." However, he did allow that the lack of experience might give him "the degree of ignorance necessary to make me a suitable Chairman of this meeting."

Characteristically, Dewey had observed carefully as his own children attended college, and he noted this to the group at Rollins as his most noteworthy source of thought about undergraduate education. Maintaining that his children were offered "a deadly scheme" of six courses, two hours at a time, in their freshman years, he recalled telling them, "I didn't care about their slighting some courses, but I did hope they would find some one thing they were interested in to which they could really devote their

thoughts and mental operations" (Rollins College, 1931).

Dewey's professed limitations concerning his understanding of undergraduate education may have provoked more than a few smiles among the impressive group of educators invited to Winter Park, Florida, to debate the ideal liberal arts college curriculum. Several of them already viewed Dewey and the progressive education movement as a source of insight and an inspiration to experimentation in undergraduate liberal education. Among the probable smilers around the conference table was Constance Warren, president of nearly two-year-old Sarah Lawrence College, a brave and thoughtful experiment committed to progressive ideals in women's education. Also attending--and perhaps smiling--was Beatrice Doerschuk, Sarah Lawrence's academic dean. The college's central commitments to individual student interests and learning settings governed by democratic principles were so rooted in Dewey's philosophy of education that president Warren eventually would insist, "This college does not claim to have discovered anything new in educational philosophy. The principles of so-called 'progressive education' on which it was founded have long been known and practiced on the secondary school level" (1940, p. 261).

Also present at the Rollins conference was Antioch College president Arthur Morgan, who had recently saved his institution from the brink of bankruptcy with an experimental work-study curriculum that sacrificed neither liberal learning nor preparation for employment. Morgan was fond of quoting Dewey's educational philosophies in Antioch Notes, the college periodical he started in 1923. Eagerly supportive of a progressive aim for undergraduate education, he noted of the American

college:

> Its business is to orient and to integrate personality, to develop the entire mind and character of the student. Unless it sees its vital work and does it, the college will be ground out of existence between the upper and nether millstones of the graduate school and the junior college. All its endowments will but prolong the process" (1930, p. 220).

Dean Max McConn of Lehigh University, Dr. James Harvey Robinson of the New School for Social Research, and Dr. Goodwin Watson of Teachers College were among the other conference participants who could readily trace experimentation in higher education to the spirit of educational inquiry spurred by Dewey's prolific writing and speaking.

Deviation, Adaptation, and Experimentation

The conference attendees at Rollins reflected an environment of experimentation that seemed to permeate post-secondary liberal education for approximately two decades, starting in the 1920's. Some historians have noted roots of this creative, non-traditional movement in Dewey's ideas about the role of education in social change and the role of the student in forging educational aims and substance (Cremin, 1962; Grant, 1984; Rudolph, 1962; Townsend, Newell and Wiese, 1992). The popular discussion about progressivity in the schools took hold when college and university educators had begun to voice concerns about trends that placed less emphasis on the development of students and more emphasis on the development of specialized knowledge. The example set by progressive educators who tested ideas in new laboratory schools and in reforms at existing schools also may have encouraged some college educators to make the transition

from vocal to visionary.

The completely transformed Antioch College and the newly founded Sarah Lawrence College soon were joined by additional experimenters. Bennington College in Vermont opened its doors in 1932 with progressive educator William Kilpatrick at the helm of its board of trustees and with a commitment to community ideals, practitioner faculty members, art fully integrated into the curriculum, and self-directed learning. Bennington president Robert D. Leigh noted in his 1929 prospectus document, "Educational Plan for Bennington College," that the institution would follow the lead of progressive schools in adopting the aims of, "individuality, direct experience, serious interest, initiative, creative and independent work, and self-dependence" (qtd. in Brockway, 1981, p. 35). Black Mountain College in North Carolina was founded in 1933 with central themes of democratic governance, student interest and independence, art central to the curriculum, and in-classroom experience. Ninety-year-old Olivet College opted for experimental status in 1934 when a new president, Joseph Brewer, replaced its traditional curriculum with tutorials and an emphasis on "allowing each student to find the subject of his particular interest" (qtd. in Reithmiller, 1982, p. 122). In 1935, Bard College (formerly St. Stephen's) surfaced as an experiment along the Hudson River conducted by Teachers College faculty. Another complete make-over occurred at Goddard College, a traditional college in Vermont which in 1937 recast itself as an experimental learning community.

Several other endeavors during that heady time of experimentation included those prompted by educational philosophies that appeared substantively opposed to Dewey's

ideals: Alexander Meiklejohn's Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin, St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, and Robert Maynard Hutchins' College of the University of Chicago. Although the text-centered curriculum of these rigorous programs aimed at training students in "a common stock of fundamental ideas" (Hutchins, 1936, p. 59) and sparked much debate between progressive and neo-classic educators, they shared at least some common ground with the "progressive" experiments centered on student interest. Both types of experiments aimed for an intellectually mature and self-disciplined individual whose education served as preparation for responsible life in a democratic society. Additionally, they converged on issues of interdisciplinary approaches to ideas and the engagement of students and faculty together in teaching and learning. Dewey himself, who became a party to outraged philosophical debates in the press with Hutchins and Meiklejohn, was able to find common ground when he penned a review of Meiklejohn's 1932 book, The Experimental College:

> Another aspect of this book is its contribution to the art of teaching--its discussion of what goes on, or may be induced to go on, in the contact of mind with mind. To the teacher, the chapters devoted to this topic are most enlightening.... It is a contribution to the philosophy of American education. The discussion of the theory is, of course, the more pointed and the more significant because, unlike most such discussions, it comes to us as the philosophy of an actual undertaking, not as a full bolt from the blue of abstraction. Moreover, the educational ideas presented are tied up with a clearly thought-out conception of the nature, the defects and promise, of American culture and life. (1932, p. 23)

Admittedly, the spirit of maverick reform and renewal in American higher education was not newly conceived in the progressive education era. But the earlier history of experimentation had largely been a history of deviation and adaptation. The

classic British models of higher education were reworked into Colonial colleges. Later, these and newly-founded institutions emerged as universities fashioned along the lines of German models. The earliest land grant institutions were innovative, to be certain, but they adapted to social and economic realities more than they experimented with methods of education. A very different and distinctive early example of pioneering in higher education, Berea College, founded in 1855, was not so much an experiment in education as an important experiment in extending higher education to students from impoverished Appalachian families, including women and blacks. It was left to the experimental colleges of the early twentieth century, however, to go beyond adaptation of other models or deviation in who and what was taught. Those colleges drew from a base of philosophical inquiry about the aims of all education and the place of education in society, and they found strength of purpose in an era that embraced pragmatic applications of progressive thought.

Influence Most Direct: Black Mountain College

While John Dewey's influence is evident in helping to establish an environment that nurtured new thought and practice in higher education, it is less clear in any specific cases where Dewey himself may have been instrumental in the founding or flourishing of higher education experiments. However, as a frequenter of conferences and convocations and as a noted listener to others' ideas, he undoubtedly had ample opportunity for very direct contact and influence among higher educators of the progressive persuasion. One of those was John Andrew Rice, the brilliant, audacious, and iconoclastic founder of Black Mountain College in North Carolina, whose

acquaintance with John Dewey would help to inform and enrich his own thoughts about education at Black Mountain.

Rice, in fact, also was present at the curriculum conference at Rollins College in 1931. He was not an invited guest, however, but a member of the Rollins faculty who observed the proceedings from the sidelines. In keeping with a lifelong tendency to bask in his own outspoken candor, Rice later fumed to historian Martin Duberman:

> The curriculum conference was taken over by this jackass from Columbia, Goodwin Watson. He had a claque consisting of the president of Sarah Lawrence and her dean. So every time Watson said, "I think it's raining outside," the sun might be shining but they were applauding. So he took over the whole show, and John Dewey never said a word. He just sat and listened. He was a wonderful listener. (interview, June 10, 1967)

At Rollins, where Rice arrived in 1930 after stormy exits from positions at University of Nebraska and New Jersey College for Women, Rice taught Latin and Greek language, literature, history, and philosophy, employing a Socratic manner that encouraged discussions to deviate widely from standard classics fare. With an experimental bent that embraced block scheduling and discouraged lecture and recitation, Rollins seemed an appropriate match for Rice, a former Rhodes Scholar whose Oxford days had convinced him that students were adults who needed to be put in charge of their own learning. At Rollins he could range at will through the type of classroom dialogue that had prompted a student at Nebraska to label him, "the most stimulating student influence at the University of Nebraska and the late '20's," and to recall, "We students used to remark that we were sure, not that Mr. Rice looked like Socrates, but that Socrates must have looked like Mr. Rice" (Frisbie, 1942, p. 9).

Many, if not most, of Rice's students at Rollins found him humorous, supportive, intellectually stimulating, and caring. Within a few years, however, some discovered his candor could become insensitive and his impatience abrasive. A number of faculty colleagues concluded the same. And when Rice began speaking publicly about what he viewed as administrative hypocrisy at the college (noting, for example, that 30 percent faculty pay cuts occurred while large new buildings were being constructed), Rollins president Hamilton Holt called for his resignation. When it was not forthcoming, Holt terminated his appointment in the spring of 1933.

Students and faculty took sides; additional faculty were fired for their support of Rice; and a well publicized AAUP investigation followed. Arthur O. Lovejoy, who headed the AAUP on-site team, reported the extremes of Rice's complex persona:

> In the Committee's judgment his dismissal eliminated from the faculty a teacher who appears on the one hand to have done more than any other to provoke questioning, discussion, and the spirit of critical inquiry among his students, and on the other hand, to have aimed, with exceptional success, at constructive results both in thought and character....
>
> Professor Rice has unquestionably much disturbed the harmony of the local community and seriously offended a number of his colleagues and other persons.... (Lovejoy and Edwards, 1933, p. 424)

During the Depression summer of 1933, Rice and number of his dissident Rollins colleagues, as well as a handful of loyal student followers, talked from time to time about education and their thoughts about an improved liberal arts college. The idea of shedding the heavy hand of upper administration was, predictably, high on the list of priorities. Also on the list: Students in charge of their own learning destinies, emphasis on the practice of arts, senior level (approximately second two years) studies devoted to

guided projects rather than classes, elimination of grades, the use of outside examiners to approve readiness for graduation, and full community participation in governance. Rice was determined that the best way to prepare students for life in a democracy was to help them develop maturity and responsibility of both emotion and intellect. He frequently railed against the German university influence for its emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge, insisting, "What you do with what you know is the important thing. To know is not enough" (1937, p. 595).

In their deliberations during the summer, the group was sometimes joined by Rice's brother-in-law, Swarthmore College president Frank Aydelotte, credited with importing and adapting the Oxford honors system to American higher education. Aydelotte urged Rice to establish a new and experimental college. Other colleagues found a campus--a summer conference and camp facility for the YMCA located near Black Mountain, North Carolina, and available for lease from mid-September through May. Donors committed $15,000. A group of 21 students and eight faculty were recruited, including Josef Albers who arrived at Black Mountain from Germany as the first Bauhaus master to immigrate to the United States. On September 25, 1933, two months before the AAUP report would be published to exonerate Rice and censure Rollins, the doors opened on one of the most significant experiments in American higher education.

Several chroniclers of Black Mountain College have mistakenly emphasized its founding as somehow connected with a search for "community" (Duberman, 1972; Grant and Riesman, 1978). Black Mountain, however, was founded first and foremost as a

place of education. If a sense of community evolved from its small size (never more than 100 students), its relatively remote location, and its use of democratic and participatory principles, that was considered incidental to its educational mission. Rice (1937) stressed that the college had little in common with earlier experimental utopian communities because it was not an end for the satisfaction of participants, but a means for education:

> One of the difficulties we have here is that the students and faculty come here with the idea that this is going to be an ideal community. And when this idea goes haywire, as it always does, they get disturbed on that score.... Here, our job is to have people do what they came to do and then leave. (p. 5)

Only after he became founder and rector of Black Mountain College did Rice have much contact with notable educational scholars and thinkers of his time. As he attended meetings and conferences, he came to particularly admire John Dewey, Arthur Morgan, Scott Buchanan and Stringfellow Barr of St. John's College, and progressive educators Hans Froelicher of the Park School and John French of the Cambridge School. Prior to that time, Rice's education about education was strictly experiential. At the Webb School, a preparatory school in Bell Buckle, Tennessee, he learned from his revered teacher, John Webb, a respect for Socratic method and listening above lecturing. As an undergraduate at Tulane University, he encountered Carnegie units to measure student progress and received what he called "my introduction to numerology in education" (1942, p. 225). At Oxford, he noticed that students would work very hard when given substantial latitude, few rules, and individualized academic guidance in pursuit of their education. As a University of Chicago graduate student who never

finished his PhD dissertation, he decided, "Research is the report of what one has found out rather than of what one knows" (1942, p. 297).

At the University of Nebraska, his first teaching appointment in higher education, Rice began to think about what he knew of contemporary students. Many of the seemingly unprepared or unsophisticated--often from Nebraska farms--turned out to have admirable native intelligence that could confound standard admissions data but allowed them to become fine undergraduates. Rice also noted two types among the successful students. One he labeled the "young grammarian," a student who enjoyed knowledge acquisition and truth seeking in a detached way that did not need philosophical integration. The other he called the "young philosopher," a student "for whom ideas have a quality, as it were, of personality. Life is to him an adventure" (1925, p. 545).

Instrumental in integrating Rice's experiential learning with the thoughts of other scholars was a Rollins College colleague named Ted Dreier. Silver spoon born and Harvard educated, Dreier came from a large New York family of industrial barons, art patrons, and social reformers. The family had been friendly with the family of John Dewey since Ted Dreier was a youngster. Dreier arrived at Rollins to teach physics the same year (1930) as John Andrew Rice, and the young Dreier and Rice families became friends and neighbors. The two faculty members often engaged in lengthy discussions about what Dreier later characterized as "our common interests in life and education" (interview, April 15, 1993).

Although he was not one of those fired in the aftermath of the Rice fracas, possibly owing to the presence of his wealthy aunt, Margaret Dreier (Mrs. Raymond)

Robins, on the Rollins board of trustees, Dreier resigned in protest, in principle, and in friendship. He quickly became crucial in the planning and development of Black Mountain College--as a masterful money manager, as a sounding board for Rice's thoughts about education, and as someone who eventually would encourage John Dewey to visit.

John Dewey made the first of three visits to the college during the winter of 1935, and John Andrew Rice became fond of him immediately. Rice decided that Dewey compared favorably to his beloved teacher John Webb of Webb School, later recalling, "John Webb and John Dewey are the only men I have known who never questioned the individual's right to be alive. They took that for granted, and began from there" (1942, p. 331).

Rice drew encouragement from what he noted of Dewey's emphasis on teaching and learning, rather than on institutions and movements. When he expressed to Dewey his fear that all the excitement and experimentation at Black Mountain might eventually become pedestrian, Dewey reassured, "As long as you keep your eye on the individual, that won't happen" (qtd. in Rice, 1942, pp. 324-325).

When Dewey worried about the practice of progressive education in the hands of zealots, he vented his concerns in ways aimed at constructively reframing classroom methods. He pointed out the differences between freedom to learn and anarchy in the schools, insisting that students cannot mature toward life in society when, "in some progressive schools the fear of adult imposition has become a veritable phobia," and where educators demonstrated "enthusiasm much more than understanding" of

progressive concepts (1930, p. 204).

John Andrew Rice had similar concerns, but his response reflected his characteristic cynicism. After visiting a number of progressive schools, he wrote his friend and fellow Rhodes scholar Elmer Davis, "Progressive education, when it is stupid, is much more stupid than the other kind" (May 1, 1934). He was particularly rankled to hear Black Mountain College called "progressive," a label first attached by an announcement of the college's opening in The New York Evening Post, headlined "Progressive Education Becomes Collegiate" (Gow, p. 3).

While Black Mountain College shared progressive ideals concerning the roots of learning, its founders continually struggled to define the boundaries of freedom, to instill responsibility, and to establish habits of discipline. They hit upon the idea of placing art central in the curriculum for just that purpose. Headed by Josef Albers and eventually becoming the icon by which Black Mountain College was best remembered, the art program was envisioned primarily as a route to disciplined processes, and only secondarily as development in creativity or aesthetic appreciation. Rice explained the concept to author Louis Adamic:

> Nearly every man is a bit of an artist, at least potentially a person of imagination, which can be developed; and, so far as I know at this moment, there is but one way to train and develop him--the way discovered, not by me but by Black Mountain College as a whole. Here our central and consistent effort now is to teach method, not content; to emphasize process, not results; to invite the student to the realization that the way of handling facts and himself amid the facts is more important than facts themselves. (qtd. in Adamic, 1936, p. 518)

Students at Black Mountain attended only two required courses: " Plato I," taught

by John Andrew Rice as a free-wheeling conversation in front of a fireplace or out on the portico of the massive and columned main campus building, Robert E. Lee Hall; and Albers' first-level art course in working with materials and form. Beyond those, they chose from studies in music, literature, economics, mathematics, languages, history, drama, and a range of special topics. Each student was assigned an advisor who helped her/him design studies to match interests. Tutorials were used when only one or two students had an interest in an area not covered by available courses.

On one two-week visit to the campus, John Dewey attended Rice's Plato class each day, but said very little and offered teaching suggestions only when pressed. leading Rice to conclude:

> John Dewey was the only man I have every known who was completely fit and fitted to live in a democracy. He sat and said nothing; but something happened when he was there. . . . He had respect for the process of learning. He had it because he had respect for people. (1942, p. 331)

On one of Dewey's visits to the college, he was accompanied by his good friend Albert Barnes, the noted and eccentric art collector from Marion, Pennsylvania, who brought along what Rice still remembered 30 years later as, "the most divine whiskey I've ever tasted, a whole case full of it" (interview with M. Duberman, June 10, 1967).

Dewey's visits to Black Mountain were marked by no seminars or speeches. Instead, he attended classes, listened in community meetings, conversed with faculty over whiskey in Barnes' room, and gave feedback about the teaching and learning he observed at the maverick college only when pressed. His most important feedback to Rice and other faculty very likely was the role model he created--caring enough to fully take part,

but too caring to instruct or advise until asked. Dewey also socialized freely with Black Mountain students. Norman Weston, who had transferred to Black Mountain from Rollins, remembered trips to "Roy's," the students' favorite beer joint in the town of Black Mountain, with Dewey and groups of faculty and students. Weston recalled Dewey as "jolly good company over a beer--warm, wise, and in good humor" (interview, April 13, 1993).

When Rice took Dewey and a group of students to a regional meeting of the Progressive Education Association in Atlanta, the students were surprised by the flurry Dewey caused. However, they saw that the royal treatment did not change the John Dewey they knew when he cut an official luncheon to join them at a beer parlor (Rice, 1942).

Impact, If Any

When Robert Maynard Hutchins' book, The Higher Learning in America, was published in 1936, Dewey took up pen against Hutchins' appeal for higher education that, largely through great texts, aimed at refining the intellect by creating a body of shared knowledge among the intellectual. Several issues of Social Frontier recorded the debate. Likewise, John Andrew Rice, debating Hutchins' proposals in the pages of Harper's, wrote an eloquent statement about the place of experience in education, including:

> Why exclude from general education all but one means of getting experience? Why include what can be printed and leave out what must be seen or heard? to some, Aeschylus and the sculpture of Chichen-Itza are in quality very near together. But we are to exclude one because it cannot be got from a book.... It comes down to this: with all experience excluded except the experience of reading and thinking, with observation and experiment left out, the proposed education is to be got through spoken--or

> what is more remote--printed language. The assumption seems to be that there is a one-to-one correspondence between language and thought. (1937, p. 588)

Undoubtedly Dewey--person, philosophies, or both--helped Rice and other educators give voice to their ideas and practices. Dewey's example, as the philosopher and educator with a decided preference for seeing ideas through to action, very well may have helped to demonstrate the possibilities to others. Most simply, Dewey contributed to raising the level of debate about higher education in America and to raising the possibility of experimentation.

But to John Andrew Rice, Dewey also was an impressive, unforgettable individual. Notably, for example, until he met John Dewey, Rice almost never--if ever--spoke of the social implications of education. His concerns had been within the classroom and within the institution of higher learning, and he had given scant thought to education's essential role in social democracy, a cornerstone in Dewey's philosophy. By 1937, however, with a touch of his characteristic audacity, Rice was able to put education in its social and political context to appeal:

> We ought to begin to consider education as a thing concerned at least in part with how people feel. If we do not, somebody else will, and all our structure of thought will disappear as quickly as it has in Nazi Germany. There was a country where the universities were concerned with pure thought, where the keenest thinking of the modern world was being done. And yet not a word was heard from the seats of learning when the house painter appeared and roused the Germans to feeling. While intellection was being sharpened and polished, savagery was going its way, waiting for a chance. (p. 590)

If John Dewey and his progressive ideas influenced experimental colleges, Black

Mountain College offers an instance of the nature of that influence--direct and stemming from personal example, as well as indirect and stemming from prominent debates and institutional examples of the time. Of course, if John Dewey had been asked about his influence on experimental higher education, he might have demurred about the importance of his role. In doing so, he could rely on a statement he made at the 1931 curriculum conference at Rollins:

> All education is experimental, whether we call it that or not. We simply can't help that and we are experimenting with very precious and valuable material in the lives of these young people. We may think or try to convince ourselves that there is not experimental element in the situation, but practically everything we co, every course we lay out, every class we meet, is in its effects an experiment for good or for bad. . . . (Rollins College, 1931)

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